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Sol BARKIN : *Worker Militancy and its Consequences*, 2nd Ed. The Changing Climate of Western Industrial Relations, New York Praeger Publisher, 1983, 400 pp., ISBN 0-03-061793-6

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RECENSIONS
BOOK REVIEWS

Worker Militancy and its Consequences, 2nd Edition, The Changing Climate of Western Industrial Relations, edited by Sol Barkin, New York, Praeger Publisher, 1983, pp. xii + 440. ISBN 0-03-061793-6; 0-03-61792-8 pkb

Updating a book is no easy task. Doing it with a collection of national authors is even more difficult. In taking on that task, the former Research Director of the Textile Workers' Union of America and now Professor Emeritus of Economics at the University of Massachusetts has earned high marks. The choice of authors for each country is well thought out and, by sending them a suggested outline for updating, the editor did introduce some degree of balance. The results are a bit uneven, but cohesion is supplied primarily by the excellent introductory chapter by Sol Barkin and by his provocative final chapter. Sol Barkin's second edition is particularly valuable in that it begins to deal with the effects of the economic crisis of the 1980s on labour-management relations. Indeed it is one of the first serious tomes of what will predictably be a torrent of studies before long. A book, even an updated edition, cannot be a daily newspaper. Barkin goes as far in that direction as you can hope, by adding short «Editor's Notes» to several of the chapters, updating the updates, as it were. Yet this book makes it clear that the sharp recession and the longer term «stagflationary context of high unemployment and high prices have raised serious doubts as to the chances of continued «cooperation», «concertation» or «progress-sharing» approaches in a number of countries.

Sumner Rosen of Columbia University, (like Barkin — and this reviewer — a former trade union officer) sums it up in the surprisingly short chapter on the U.S. He cites the high unemployment levels, the drop in the proportion of organized labour in the work force — already the lowest in the industrialized world — and the spreading phenomenon of «takeaway concessions» in a number of industries. Rosen then quotes a chilling remark by the president of an international union (the «ladies' garment» workers) long noted for its compatible relationships with management, about a «two-tier» labour movement in which many union members count among the working poor (p. 369). That, and the reference to R. Herding's term of the «hard core employed» who may «still» be fighting to defend their previous gains, may easily lead us to share Rosen's conclusion that «union ability to protect jobs, earnings and basic rights is at risk (p. 370). Canadian and European readers might however find it a bit difficult to believe that the decline in U.S. labour's strength has been so great as to justify the statement that «The AFL-CIO leadership that has succeeded Meany has not filled this gap; by contrast, Meany's views were often dramatic, pungent and heard» (p. 370).

Initiatives and Resistance

Barkin and, for example, the author of the chapter on Italy, Pietro Merli Brandini (a national secretary of the CISL confederation and an intellectual link in the Italian power galaxy) give dramatic descriptions of the rise of a «new unionism» in the late '60s and early 70s. The good description of the Italian unions would have been still better if it had included a bit more attention to the evolution within the political system, and particularly within the strongest party in the labour movement, the Italian Communist Party, heart of «Euro-communism».

What a difference between unions just a few years ago pushing back the limits of collective bargaining, putting investment decisions on the bargaining table in Italy, winning full information rights and «priority interpretation» of collective agreement clauses in Sweden, — and the attempts to battle against concessions and other backward steps in many countries today. That difference is particularly dramatic in Italy in 1984, where the government attempts to introduce some «austerity», particularly by whittling down the cost of living adjustments, have become the occasion for a growing split of the labour movement along party lines, undermining one of the major conquests of the «Hot Autumn» of 1969.

The Swedish chapter, by Casten van Otter (of the Working Life Centre in Stockholm), paints a good picture of the initiatives of the Socialist governments prior to 1977 in the directions of sexual equality and democracy in the workplace, with the three mechanisms of the Job Security Act, the Work Environment Act and the Act for Joint Regulation of Working Life, all passed by 1976. Van Otter goes on to describe the «interregnum» of six years of various coalitions of non-Socialist or «bourgeois party» government, which succeeded in slowing down but not in reversing the trend.

The 1982 election of a Socialist majority in Sweden's Parliament, helped along by «uncivilized» high unemployment rates over 3 percent and by an apparently more civilized reaction to the «scare methods» of the employer campaign» with the help of American P.R. Consultants», has now (since the publication of this book) been followed by the introduction of the much-discussed and much-amended law on «wage-earner investment funds». Based on a 20 percent share of all profits over the rate of inflation, plus a 0.2 percent tax on company payrolls, the Funds are in effect since January 1984. There are 5 regional funds, with provision for separate blue-collar, white-collar, community and employer representation (at this writing the employers are holding back).

The opposition of the employers has had a direct effect on the political and industrial life of Sweden. In an attempt to halt the passage of the law, the employers and their supporters (roughly 70,000 of them) took to the streets of Stockholm in October 1983). The employers' federation, SAF, announced they were breaking off tripartite national concertations on collective bargaining. And in the Spring of 1984, SAF refused to negotiate the traditional confederation-level framework wage agreement. Instead, the various industry level employer federations negotiated separate agreements with each industrial union, well above the government's projected inflation rate, but with widely-varying termination dates (12 to 27 months).

Humpty-Dumpty

The similarly negative effect, of employer opposition to partial extension of co-determination law in 1976, on the «konzertierte Aktion», or top-level tripartism, is briefly described in a long chapter on West Germany by Professors Joachim Bergmann and Walther Mueller-Jentsch. The break-off of those tripartite meetings in 1977 has not been overcome since. Nor is that likely to happen right now, with the waves of strikes and lockouts in the metal and printing industries that followed the government-supported refusal of management (at this writing) to discuss the union request for a 35-hour week.

The call for movement toward a 35-hour week has indeed become one of the first major «Common Market» collective bargaining demands, based largely on the hope that it will stem — or even turn back somewhat — the high tide of unemployment. But it comes at a moment when, largely because of that same high unemployment, many employer organizations feel the time is ripe to reverse certain trends that had been chipping or chopping away at management prerogatives.

In France, for example, the powerful employers' federation, the CNPF, has launched a campaign for a type of across-the-board application of a U.S. employer piecemeal approach (e.g., in the Aerospace industry) known as the two-tier wage scales. The French employers' federation say they will cooperate in the attempt to hire new workers (the press speaks of some 470,000) over the next five years, only if they can all be E.N.C.A. (emplois nouveaux à contrainte allégée or «new jobs less protected»). New employees could get less pay, less fringe benefits, less legal benefits and be easily dismissed at any time, under this program. This was announced at the end of May 1984, at a time when the French Socialist-led government was doing battle with considerable economic problems, particularly in the steel industry. The announcement also came at a time when that government was trying to assure the peaceful application of the four sets of «Auroux laws» democratizing relations in the workplace.

The French chapter is one of those in which the updating is a brave try, with the original edition's chapter by the well-known Jean-Daniel Reynaud and a rather brief update by Jacques Rojot of the Management School, INSEAD. The short mention of international affiliations of some French unions (a subject which could well have been given more attention there and elsewhere in the book) should have been updated. For example, the French CFDT disaffiliated from the World Confederation of Labour back in 1979 (p. 301). Also, the WCL has now accepted the affiliation of the breakaway union that split away from the CFDT when it «deconfessionalized» in 1964, the Christian CFTC. But these details are of interest mainly to specialists. More important, in this reviewer's opinion, is the watershed nature of the series of «strike revolts» characterized by May 1, 1968 in France and more aptly analyzed in Barkin's concluding chapter (and by Merli Brandini on Italy) than in the one on France.

The British chapter, by Professor John Goodman, does a good job of tying the evolution of industrial relations to that of political power and economic trends, as well as outlining the step by step, or «incremental» application by the Thatcher government of a series of steps to weaken the trade unions. Goodman points out that Mrs. Thatcher has «moved decisively away from collaborative corporatism» of the «Wilson-Callaghan strategy» of Labour governments, to an approach that is «legalistic and essentially coercive».

«Most important», he writes «the commitment to high employment — perhaps the central imperative of economic policy since 1945 — was swept away». Goodman describes «the refusal to take countercyclical reflationary measures» to create employment «a central feature of the Conservative strategy», a strategy reinforced by the «Falklands victory» over a decrepit Argentine military regime.

Canadian «Exceptionalism»

Canada at least (one is tempted to say «at last») gets a chapter in this book — written by George V. Haythorne, a former deputy minister of labour as well as prices and incomes commissioner. Many U.S. and European industrial relations writers fail to understand the significant practical and ideological differences between Canadian and U.S. trade unions, employer organizations and industrial relations. They are often misled by the overlapping of some institutions and operations into disregarding the important effects of divergent ones. The same is sometimes true of English-Canadian authors with respect to Québec.

The roles of the various labour centres in Québec, the Québec Federation of Labour (whose «special status» was clearly won at the Vancouver — not Winnipeg (p. 328) convention of the Canadian Labour Congress, after years of internal strife with CLC officers who tried to maintain the fiction that it was «just another provincial federation»), the «ex-Christian»

CNTU-CSN still affiliated to the World Confederation of Labour, its breakaway moderate group, the CSD, and even the building trades council, here a distinct minority of that industry, are quite different from those of labour centres in the rest of Canada. The same is true of the major employers' federation, the CPQ, and of many of the complexities of industrial relations.

The 1980 split from the CLC of the 13 affiliated unions belonging to the AFL-CIO building trades department and the founding by 10 of them of a Canadian Federation of Labour (mistakenly referred to as a «Confederation of Labour» — pages 329, 351) are given a somewhat mystifying explanation, due perhaps to a printing error.

Haythorne is encouraged by the openness of this breakaway federation to cooperation with government and business. He has some difficulty at times understanding the anti-concession campaign spear-headed by the auto workers and supported by the CLC. His references to the Chrysler strike and various UAW agreements are not entirely accurate. The 1982 Canadian strike not only forced Chrysler to increase considerably its «final offer» to the U.S. workers who did not strike, but it also won for Canadian workers a complete catch-up, during the course of the agreement, with General Motors and Ford rates at the time. (With new GM and Ford negotiations due to start in 1984, these workers will undoubtedly pull ahead again — for a while).

The chapter carries some rather complacent judgments, natural perhaps for an «official» author but exasperating for the people affected. To say that the «department (of labour) ensured that acceptable employment, health and safety standards were maintained for all workers ...» (p. 340) is about as realistic as referring to a mythical «government's active promotion of equality in employment for women and men in both the public and private sectors...» (p. 338).

Haythorne's interest in ventures such as the extinct Industrial Relations Joint Committee, leads him to praise the employers' organizations, which «unlike unions» have «not become identified to any one political party ... and have generally shown considerable flexibility and openness in conceding (sic!) their corporate responsibilities». The labour movement has joined, at the end of 1983, in setting up a new Canadian Labour Market and Productivity Institute together with the Business Council for National Issues, but excluding labour ministry or other governmental representation.

The chapter does point out that «Clearly the government's role in industrial relations had expanded sharply over the postwar decades» ... and «out of these government actions or failures to act grew much of the restiveness and militancy in industrial relations that emerged in the seventies» (p. 340).

We might add that this may be part of the background which can help people understand the Canadian «exceptionalism» that means that both Canadian or Québecois national unions and Canadian regions of international unions are acting more militantly against concessions and that the Canadian union membership rate has reached a 1983 record of 40 percent of non-agricultural wage-earners, at a time when their U.S. counterparts have been going in so different a direction.

Gloom in Benelux

The chapters on Belgium, updated by Professor Thérèse Beaupain, and the Netherlands, by Professors Bram Peper (Lord Mayor of Rotterdam) and Gerrit van Kooten, are marked by the effects on industrial relations — and on political relations — of deep religious rifts.

The Dutch labour movement, this chapter reminds us, was once badly split three ways, with the famous «Pastoral letter» of Catholic Bishops in 1954 refusing Holy Sacrament to «Catholics known to be members of a Socialist union», as well as the setting up of Protestant unions by followers of the Dutch Re-reformed Church and its political expression, the wonderfully-name Anti-Revolutionary Party. What a change since then for the Catholic and Socialist unions, who now have merged in the new FNV! The surge of that merger, coming after the increase in militancy in the '60s and early '70s, soon subsided, however, under the pressure of the recession, the conservative government and the highest unemployment rate in the industrialized world (17.4 percent in April, 1984).

Belgium, with its other major problem — the cultural and economic split between the francophone and Flemish areas and with its highly multinationalized industry, is particularly sensitive to world economic trends. Mme Beaupain, in addition to giving us one of the rare references in this book to pre-World War II historical roots of labour, feels that the consensus — based «Belgian model has progressively disappeared». She cites the President of the powerful metal employers' federation as saying «The rituals have been retained but the faith is no longer present». One of her own remarks may be appropriate far beyond little Belgium in today's «elusive recovery»: «On the other hand, nobody believes very much any more in economic expansion» (p. 157).

In his «Summary and Conclusion» Sol Barkin calls our attention to the «new activism» of the '60s and '70s, bringing new weight to specific groups of workers, such as women, youth, migrants and immigrants, and white-collar workers. We can acknowledge that this new activism may have strengthened the resolve of employers to hold back or turn back the clock of social change in the workplace. We may also judge that this same activism is one of the reasons labour militancy, though weakened, has carried on ten years later in most industrialized countries and at a higher level than many employers and governments expected in the economic circumstances. In that case, shall we expect new and perhaps innovative attempts to either convince or coerce labour — the workers and their unions — to give up income guarantees, extensive benefits and control of work rules? Or shall we see unions, in Canada and elsewhere, dig in their toes and echo the Director for Canada of the United Auto Workers, Bob White, in summarizing the rejection of concessions by the Canadian Council of his union with the rhetorical question: «Who needs a union to walk us backwards»?

This book made me think. It should do the same for teachers, researchers, practitioners and others interested in comparative industrial relations in these changing times.

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The Australian Council of Trade Unions. History and Economic Policy, by C.D. Donn, New York, University Press of America, 1983, 366 pp., ISBN 0-8191-2728-9 (pbk.)

L'Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) est la formation syndicale la plus importante en Australie. En 1983, elle regroupait 156 syndicats représentant 2.35 millions de travailleurs. À ce titre, l'ACTU est de loin le porte-parole le plus influent des travailleurs syndiqués australiens (56% de l'ensemble des employés).

Comme son titre l'indique, cet ouvrage est à la fois une histoire de l'ACTU et une étude de ses politiques économiques. Le livre comporte une courte introduction destinée au lecteur qui n'est pas familier avec l'Australie